



## The ethno-nationality of a modern saint: an interdisciplinary approach

Mother Teresa: the saint and her Nation, by Gezim Alpion, Birmingham, Bloomsbury, 2020, 350 pp., \$82.80 (eBook), ISBN 978-93-89165-06-7

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To cite this article: Arnab Das (2022): The ethno-nationality of a modern saint: an interdisciplinary approach, Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies, DOI: [10.1080/19448953.2022.2129328](https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2022.2129328)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2022.2129328>



Published online: 04 Oct 2022.



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## BOOK REVIEW

## The ethno-nationality of a modern saint: an interdisciplinary approach

**Mother Teresa: the saint and her Nation**, by Gezim Alpion, Birmingham, Bloomsbury, 2020, 350 pp., \$82.80 (eBook), ISBN 978-93-89165-06-7

In his successive works on Mother Teresa, Gezim Alpion has painstakingly promoted an intellectual understanding of the spiritual figure. His protracted critical engagement with the modern saint, whose life and works have been claimed by biographers and hagiographers, has not only helped in historicizing the spiritual icon, but has also provided fresh insights into the conditions that enabled the growth of this unique individual. Alpion's earlier work, *Mother Teresa: Saint or Celebrity* (2006) was a case study in the corporate identity management of the religious celebrity. The present book focuses on the layered and problematic relationship between the saint and her nation and the way both contributed to each other's character. The book's assertion of Mother Teresa's Albanian background, notwithstanding her continued reticence to such identification, enlivens a conflict between the impulse of identifying Mother Teresa with an exclusive nationality and a spiritual transcendence of the man-made geography called the Albanian nation. Consequently, Alpion approaches this intrinsic discord through various historical and sociological viewpoints to create a broader theoretical framework in comprehending the spiritual luminary, which is elaborated in three connected parts.

Albanian history played a key role in transforming Gonxhe Agnes Bojaxhiu into Mother Teresa. Therefore, the emphasis of the first part, is not so much on Mother Teresa, as it is on the historical events that shaped the contested Albanian Roman Catholic identity, which later reinforced the impulsions behind Mother Teresa's lifelong reservations against asserting her ethnicity. Constructing the link between Mother Teresa's own religiosity and that of her community thus becomes pivotal to the first part of Alpion's analysis of the spiritual imperatives that percolated into her character, often without her cognizance. Alpion's analysis of Mother Teresa's negotiations between her spiritual and her national identities are premised on the history of Roman Catholicism in Albania. The narrative thus emerges as a documentation of the struggles to preserve faith and ethnicity among the adherents, initially against barbaric invaders and subsequently against the sustained persecution from the Ottomans and the Slav authorities. Their collective plight was further aggravated by relentless indifference from the Vatican to their sufferings. One of the major propositions here is that along with the Ottoman and Serbian repressions, Vatican's indifference towards Albania had also been instrumental in severely undermining the Roman Catholic faith in the region. Assessing the impact of this complex ethnic and national heritage on the spiritual foundation of Mother Teresa is the primary objective of Alpion's text.

As the conflict between religiosity and nationality becomes a formative element of the text, Alpion employs a micro-historical approach in the second part to present a case study of two families' efforts at preserving their Albanian ethnicity and Roman Catholic faith. Alpion shows how Mother Teresa's ancestors, through migrations and entrepreneurial efforts, gradually attained, albeit briefly, a relative prosperity and affluence, as documented in their

Skopje years. That Mother Teresa's ethno-nationality became a source of anxiety in her adolescence is a fact which is further corroborated by Alpion in his analysis of the tragic effects it had on her family and the responses those events elicited from her at various stages of her life in Skopje. What is particularly remarkable here is that Alpion traverses the relatively less explored domain of Mother Teresa's ancestry, both paternal and maternal, and includes in his analysis, the family members who were hitherto left out from the scope of scholarly studies committed to her. Accordingly, the investigation enables us to closely approximate the private impulses of the nun that were instigated by the close members of her family at different phases of her early life and influenced her personality, which is the focus of the third part.

Her initiation into the Loreto Mission in Calcutta that followed her ultimate disillusionment with her nation came with continued discrimination and victimization, in her early missionary career in India. Her treatment by the superiors at the Loreto Mission underscored the institutional racism that conditioned the functioning of Christian missionaries in the colonial era. Her determination to sever her ethno-national roots, provoked largely by the overt political intrigue behind her father's painful death, turned out to be incompatible with the strict racial hierarchy within the Loreto Mission which gradually contributed to her decision to part ways and establish her own order. The discriminations she faced, especially during the Loreto years, subsequently motivated her to overcome the racial boundaries which significantly guided her vision to experiment with a transcendental spirituality. The third part also suggests that, though in the years following the establishment of the Missionaries of Charity, the relationship between Mother Teresa and the Vatican had strengthened for several pragmatic reasons, there had been no significant change in the Vatican's policy towards Albania. Equally important in this section is Alpion's rebuttal of the recent tendency to uncritically attribute a kind of patriotism to the image of Mother Teresa, akin to that of Skanderbeg, the Albanian national hero of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The text suggests that despite her repeated attempts at a reconciliation with her nation, her nationality remained a perpetual anomaly in the context of her spiritual quest.

Considering the wealth of new historical evidences that the book brings into light, the necessity of this study is evident in its assertion that Mother Teresa's beliefs and actions not merely sprang out of an innate spiritual constitution but was also an individual response to crises that were facilitated by the history of her nation. Her life reflected many trials and tribulations that were common to the people of her community. Alpion's narrative is interspersed with insightful genealogical and biographical details of Mother Teresa's life that are often overlooked by the biographers and hagiographers alike—her intimacies, relationships with her mother, siblings, cousin Filomela, and the special bond with her father, thereby locating specific behavioural and psychological motivations behind her spirituality. It vividly draws upon her joys, frustrations, religious proclivities, her complicated yet comforting relationship with Jesus and a constant struggle to comprehend Godhead. This pioneering book endows the modern saint with a human history.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2022.2129328>

